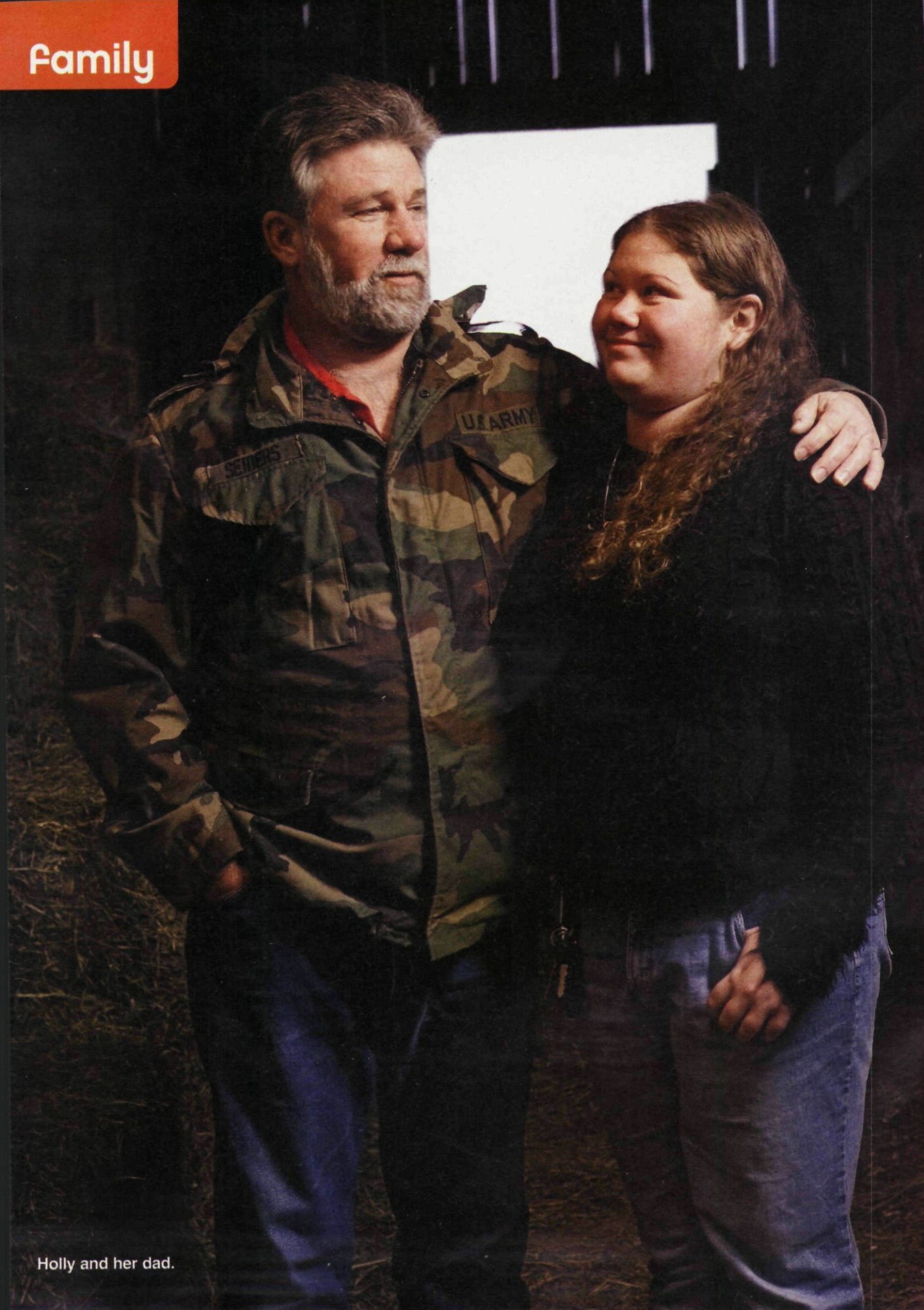


Family



Holly and her dad.

stepping up

By Nancy Fitzgerald

WHEN A
SERIOUS
INJURY
SIDELINED
HER FATHER,
HOLLY
SEIDERS
TOOK ON
THE ROLES
OF HOUSE
CLEANER,
COOK,
GARDENER,
AND
WORKER
TO HELP
HER FAMILY.

Forget Martha Stewart. Holly Seiders puts the domestic diva to shame. She can tend the garden, clean the house, and put a turkey dinner on the table, complete with all the trimmings. She can mow the lawn, hold down a part-time job, and take care of her prize-winning horse.

And Holly's only 17. Holly's not planning to challenge Martha. If the teen had the choice, she'd be hanging out with friends instead of cooking dinner for her family. But her family, it turns out, really needs her.

Disabled Dad

When Holly was 5 years old, her dad fell off a tractor-trailer at work, hitting his head on the concrete below. Though he recovered pretty quickly, something strange started happening. He got into a series of accidents that destroyed four trucks and kept him out of work for months at a time. It took doctors years to figure out what was going on. The fall, it seems, had destroyed some tissue in Holly's dad's brain, which caused him to black out—an especially scary thing for a truck driver.

Last year, Holly's parents spent three weeks at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, where her dad underwent brain surgery to repair the damage. Holly stayed home in Lebanon,

Pennsylvania, looking after the house and taking care of herself.

Those three weeks turned out to be on-the-job training for Holly. Though her dad is doing well and doctors expect him to recover, it will be a long, tough process. "After the surgery, my dad couldn't work, so I got a job to help my mom pay for car insurance, groceries, and for vet fees for my horse," Holly tells *Choices*. "I have a lot of responsibilities around the house too. Sometimes it's hard, but I'm really close to my parents and I want to do whatever I can to help."

Tough For Teens

You might know someone who is in the same situation as Holly's. There are a growing numbers of teens whose parents have a serious illness or disability, according to Dr. Paula Rauch, co-author of *Raising an Emotional Healthy Child When a Parent Is Sick*. One in four adults diagnosed with cancer has a child younger than 18, and experts believe that this ratio holds for people with other serious illnesses and disabilities. Like Holly, thousands of teenagers are helping to care for a parent who is sick and disabled.

If you're taking on more responsibility for your mom or dad, you can get through it and come out even stronger from the experience. "When they can find a balance between

helping at home and still keeping up with the things that are important for their own future, teens in this position can achieve a real sense of having a purpose," says Rauch, a psychiatrist who works with families coping with serious illness. "They'll know how valued they are in their families and what a difference they're making."

It's not easy, but Holly has managed to find that balance. When she's not being a chauffeur, cleaning

lady, chef, and dishwasher, she's doing her homework, talking to friends, or listening to music. A high-school senior, Holly's also thinking about her future. Her plan is to attend college and earn a degree in equine management. Holly hopes to own a horse farm one day. "Horses are my passion," she says.

Holly's got the right idea. "Your responsibility to your parent doesn't have to completely absorb you,"

says Debbie Mandel, a clinical psychologist and author of *Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout*. "You have the right to your own life and your own joy."

For Holly, helping to care for her dad has been challenging. But doing so has helped her mature. "I can handle many situations a lot better than anyone I know," she says. "I can do things that I never thought I could do."



Caring for her horse is a welcome diversion for Holly.

test yourself

After reading the articles on pages 14-17, read each statement below. Circle True or False for each statement. Answers are in the Teacher's Edition.

1

If you have a seriously ill parent, it's important not to express to him or her your own problems.

True False

2

Holly has so many responsibilities at home that she's not planning to attend college.

True False

3

Crying over something that is really bothering you never makes you feel better.

True False

4

Although doctors believe that Holly's dad will get better, it's still not clear when that will happen.

True False

5

Playing sports is the only way to physically relieve stress.

True False

balancing act

If you're going through a difficult time with a parent, here's how you can balance your life so that you're helping Mom or Dad while also taking care of yourself:

1 Find time for yourself. You might be so busy that you can't seem to find time for the things you love to do.

But that's a mistake, cautions Debbie Mandel, a clinical psychologist and author of *Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout*. "You really need good coping strategies to help you shed stress," Mandel says.

Try these:

- **Exercise.** Put on some music and dance. Go outside and shoot baskets. Lace up your sneakers and go for a run. "It's important to have some physical activity daily or stress levels can build up," Mandel says. "Without realizing it, you can get irritable and blow up." Holly spends some time every day riding Kristi, the horse she's had since she was 4 years old, and she enters Western-style 4-H riding competitions.

- **Express yourself.** Now and then, you're bound to feel tired and worried—and maybe even angry and frustrated. It's important to find a way to express those feelings. Confide in a friend or a trusted adult, or take time to write in your journal.

Or you can try "movie therapy." "Watch a movie on this topic, like *One True Thing*," says Mandel, referring to the 1998 movie in which a career woman quits her job to care for her seriously ill mother. "See how the characters work things out. Learn from

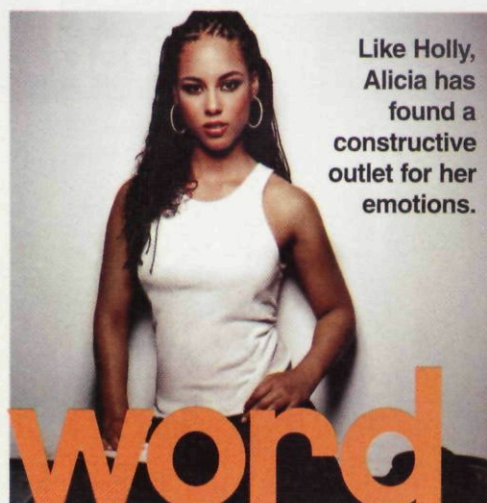
them—and have a cry. Crying raises your serotonin levels, and makes you feel better."

2 Communicate with your parents. If you're feeling overburdened and overwhelmed, talk to your parents about it. "Keep the lines of communication open with your parents," Mandel says. "Say what you want and need, and what makes you upset. Listen to your parents' side too. No matter how tough their situation, your parents love you and want the best for you.

Remember: Your emotional well-being is just as important as your parent's physical health. Holly and her mom talk every evening after Holly gets home from work. "You've got to keep communication open or you'll never be able to make it," Holly says.

3 Get organized. Use a planner notebook to keep track of important events and activities, as well as upcoming tests and school projects. Don't forget to note family responsibilities too, like the doctor's appointment you promised to take your parent to. When you've got everything on paper, it'll be easier to juggle your schedule—or juggle responsibilities with your parents or siblings.

4 Be a kid. Helping your family is important. But you have another important job: being a teenager. That means keeping up with your schoolwork, participating in after-school activities, spending time with friends, and thinking about your future.



Like Holly, Alicia has found a constructive outlet for her emotions.

Writing about what you're feeling can help you cope with problems.

Choices spoke with award-winning recording artist Alicia Keys about how writing can help a person resolve troubling issues. Alicia recently wrote a book about poetry and song lyrics called *Tears for Water*.

CHOICES: What inspires you?

ALICIA: Things that really affect me inspire me. It could be meeting a great person or discovering a new friendship. Or it could be a horrible experience, or even something I see on TV. If I connect to it, it will provoke me to write.

CHOICES: You've written that poetry has healing power. Can you explain that?

ALICIA: Poetry—any type of writing, but especially poetry—does have healing power. To be able to release your thoughts and emotions makes you feel better. You recognize what's hurting you or what's bothering you; what's scaring you or what's making you feel great! You can get an idea of what you're feeling by writing it down, so that maybe you can change it.

CHOICES: What message do you have for *Choices'* readers?

ALICIA: The idea that I live by is "express yourself." Even if it's just you, your pen, and your pad. Find that one ear—somebody—and tell that person what you feel, what you think, what you're going through.

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